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Image Attribute: Opening Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping at Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Beijing, May 14-15, 2017 / Source: China Daily

Gauging India's Response to OBOR

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The grand event on One Belt One Road (officially termed as the Belt and Road Forum) kicked off in Beijing this may, amidst a global fanfare witnessing participants from around 130 nations, along with 29 heads of states, notably from Russia and Turkey. Despite official representation from the US and other powers registering their presence, India's conspicuous absence from the event did not go unseen by the hosts. As it is known, New Delhi's opposition to OBOR stemmed from its repeated protests



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over the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which passes through what India terms as Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). Further, China's deepening ties with Pakistan and its plans to extend linkages to the entire Euro-Asian and African territorial and maritime landscapes under OBOR have been received by India with concern, given the long-term geostrategic designs Chinese are known to have planned over the years.

While transnational connectivity has remained at the forefront of all pro-globalization models, the concerns regarding the long-term impact of OBOR projects stem from the way Beijing has viewed its international economic ventures with strategic foresight. Among the numerous leading Chinese geo-strategists, the writings of Wang Jisi (especially his seminal piece in [Foreign Affairs](#)) are worth drawing upon, if one has to get a sense of China's grand strategy in brief, where he summed up China's long-term agenda in conclusion, which could be interpreted as something that challenges the very foundations of liberal international economic order. *"If the international community appears not to understand China's aspirations, its anxieties, and its difficulties in feeding itself and modernizing, the Chinese people may ask themselves why China should be bound by rules that were essentially established by the Western powers. China can rightfully be expected to take on more international responsibilities"*, wrote Jisi.

If the events leading to the formal launch of OBOR event are to be interpreted in the context discussed above, some clear interpretations could be easily derived. Foremost, OBOR coincides with a gradual retreat of Washington from Asian geo-economic sphere, whose signs were noticeable under the Obama presidency and attained further clarity under that of President Trump. The Obama administration's *"Asia Pivot"* policy, which manifested in a hard negotiated Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement (among 12 nations controlling [approximately](#) 40% of the global GDP) signed in 2016, was later quashed by the Trump administration as a result of its commitment to the promised inward-oriented development model to divert more resources to the US economy. At the moment, while there are no signs of Washington implementing any responsive strategy against OBOR, there are indications that India, and to a large extent Japan have counter strategies on the anvil.

Specifically, the ongoing Sino-Indian rivalry and India's disenchanted response to OBOR does offer some insights into New Delhi's China policy which may seem contradictory but does exhibit a noticeable pattern of how it is preparing to respond. While New Delhi maintains that CPEC's passage through PoK as a violation of its sovereignty, India's opposition to OBOR seems to have surpassed this territorial domain. That is, with the sovereignty issues notwithstanding, New Delhi's official strategic circles have been considering OBOR's long term agendas while designing



India's response strategy. Two aspects of New Delhi's response pattern need to be highlighted in this regard, namely, a "*rhetorical response*" criticizing OBOR and second, an alternative economic vision to compete with the OBOR.

Ever since the announcement of the OBOR event, statements by the Indian Foreign Office depict an aggressive posturing vis-à-vis China, which was hitherto a domain of New Delhi's unofficial hawkish camp. This stance is also reminiscent of the NAM era Moralpolitik, when New Delhi frequently took the international fora to "shame" the warring superpower camps, while at the same time extracting politico-economic concessions from the both the power blocs. Although India's opposition to OBOR comes from the CPEC, its criticism of OBOR has gone beyond CPEC and rather targeted China's hidden ambitions behind the project. One [recent statement](#) by Indian foreign office's spokesperson is worth noticing in this regard:

"We are of the firm belief that connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency, and equality. Connectivity initiatives must follow principles of financial responsibility to avoid projects that would create unsustainable debt burden for communities; balanced ecological and environmental protection and preservation standards; transparent assessment of project costs; and skill and technology transfer to help long term running and maintenance of the assets created by local communities"...[and] initiatives must follow principles of financial responsibility to avoid projects that would create an unsustainable debt burden for communities".

Clearly, New Delhi targeting the nature of Chinese projects alludes to a change of stance where it has not shied away from questioning Chinese intentions, a significant departure from the erstwhile policy of limiting its criticism of OBOR running through PoK.

The second aspect, which too, has gained traction after the OBOR event, depicts India's broader strategic vision to counter OBOR by teaming up with Japan. By questioning OBOR, New Delhi has also sought to generate goodwill (since there have been growing voices of criticism against the exploitative nature of Chinese projects) regarding the alternative connectivity project it has recently floated with Japan, [namely](#) the "*Asia-Africa growth corridor*". The project, whose outline had been formulated during in the India-Japan [joint declaration](#) during PM Modi's visit to Japan last year, was [formally announced](#) a few days after the OBOR event via a vision document. The project, which is expected to receive [\\$200 billion](#) worth funding from Japan is being projected as a more ["inclusive"](#) initiative, with the terminology seeming directed against Chinese projects.



While it is too early to figure how far India would succeed in building a strong counter-narrative against OBOR through its diplomatic channels and economic clout, it is clear that it stands prepared with a sound policy to deal with China. With this two-pronged response strategy, it still remains to be seen how successfully New Delhi is able to formulate its counter-narrative against the OBOR.

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